



# Assessment of Fakir Mohan Senapati Through the Prisms of Premises He Survived

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**Abstract**— *Fakir Mohan lived the time span which is considered as the Dark Age in the history. It was during that period in the year 1866 the most infamous 'Na anka Famine' occurred, which rattled disordered and distorted the economic and social backbone of Odisha. To pursue literature in such a difficult time was not so simple a task, when sustenance of life was in question. The grim situations of the period are duly reflected in various short stories and fictions, particularly the 'Dak Munshi' and Chhamaan Atha Guntha. Fakir Mohan's fictions and short stories comprise a wide array of themes and subjects to touch all sections of readership... He is the undisputed first Indian author to deal with social realism by introducing rustic characters and pastoral themes. Pure satire and sharp irony are the hallmarks of his writing, which is his unique instrumental technique; besides, his expressive style makes people laugh their hearts out bemused by the content, yet! Within the irony, there always remains an implied sympathy, and a tone of concerned seriousness under the surface of attack. The reason, his fictions have stood the onslaught of time to remain fresh forever with rich human content. The present paper aims to analyse the effects of his fictional writing despite constraints of the age he survived.*

**Keywords**— *Fakir Mohan Senapati, Prisms of Premises, Na anka Famine.*

Odia Literature could be distinctly classified into five parts, viz. Old Odisha (10th -1300 century), Early Middle (1300-1500), Middle (1500-1700), Late Middle (1700-1850), and Modern Odisha since 1850 till this day. Odia literature may be an assortment of ups and downs, from its ancient glory to sliding down into almost non-entity. Worthwhile to say that, the Madala Panji (the Palm-leaf Chronicles) of the Jagannatha temple at Puri happens to be the earliest forms of prose, which dates back to the 12th century. Sarala-Dasa of the 14th century was the primary great poet of Odisha, who wrote the "Chandi Purana" and also the "Vilanka Ramayana" in praise of goddess Durga. The Odia literature of the contemporary period was noticeably religious in nature up to 1500 AD. It mainly covered poems and prose works with, gods and goddesses stuffed with religious undertones. The next era, which is commonly called as the Jagannatha Dasa Period, stretches till the 1700 AD and was noticeably influenced by the 'Vaishnava movement', typified by the

compositions of Shri Chaitanya and the club of five friends called as [Pancha Sakha]. Balarama Das, Jaganath Das, Ananta Das, Yesowanta Das, and Achutananda Das; were the leading five stars of rich literature of the period, who primarily emphasized on translation and adaptation of Sanskrit texts.

It is between 1700 and 1850, the language became more complex and therefore the usage of words became considerably trickier. Kavi samrat [poet laureate] Upendra Bhanja (1670-1720), Kavi surya Baladeva Rath (1779-1845) Bidagdha Kabi Abhimanyu, Samanta Sinhar, santha kavi [a saint Poet] Bhima-Bhoi (1855-1895), and santha [saint] Arakshita Dasa, are some of the eminent faces of a typical genre called Vaishnav poetry. In this context, Upendra Bhanja's "Lavanyavati" can be termed as the finest example of one such Kavya. Family chronicles in prose and literature concerning religious festivals and rituals were also produced in large numbers during this

era. Although the 12th-century “Madala Panji” or the Palm-leaf Chronicles of the Jagannatha temple at Puri are often considered as the earliest form of Odia prose; the present form of Odia prose as well as the recent style of writing took shape undeniably during the British period.

It was this time around, when Fakir Mohan Senapati, translated the Ramayana and Mahabharata into Odia language. His famous novel “Chaman Atha Gunta” deals with the exploitation of village folks by zamindars; While Rama Sankara Ray’s “Kanci-Kaveri” (1880) led to the birth of contemporary drama in Odia during this period. However, the arduous march of Odia literature and its different branches were further carried forward by some notable Odia writers of the 20th century, which include: Gangadhar Mehera, Kuntala-Kumari Sabat, Chintamani Mahanty, and Gopabandhu Dasa. The most eminent novelists during this period were Gopala Prahara and Kalindi Charan Panigrahi. Criticism, essays also gradually became major lines of writing in the Odia language. Some writers in this field were Professor Girija Shankar Ray, Gauri Kumara Brahma, and Hare Krushna Mahatab to count a few amongst many such personalities.

Fakir Mohan Senapati is considered as the father of Odia novel and short stories. The contribution of Fakir Mohan can be distinctly brought under the principal characteristics. (1) He was the first Indian novelist to use vernacular as a potent tool for creative writing, particularly fiction. (2) He was the first Novelist to use not the elite characters but the rustics’, (3) He was the first to introduce dialogues in any fiction ever written. Fakir Mohan’s “*Chha Mana Anthaguntha*” (Six Acres and Half), gives a heart-rending and pathetic picture of the common poor, oppressed by the Zamindars and the upper-class.

Fakir Mohan Senapati applied innovative treatment of typical characters, astutely chosen from different social segments. As the leader of linguistic battle and pioneer of Odia prose fiction, the ‘Saraswati’ conferred on him by the Durbar of Damapada state, stands lame and is dwarfed before his tall contributions.

It was only after forty years; Premchand’s “Godan” (gifting a Cow) came to the picture, which is regarded as a specimen of a progressive novel. From this point of view, Fakir Mohan may be assayed as the first progressive writer in India, because his fiction was forty years ahead of Premchand’s Godan. The most important aspect that requires a mention here is that; the sphere of Fakir Mohan’s talents was not confined to the literary pursuits only. He is respected as the saviour of Odia language and for giving a new direction to Odia literature. In the face of a conspiracy and a nefarious design to end the Odia language, Fakir Mohan came forward and took the lead

along with Gangadhar Meher, Radhanath Roy, Bhaktakavi Madhu Sudan Rao, and Gauri Sankar to fight cumulatively for the cause of the Odia language and literature.

*In the words of Dr. J.V. Boulton, Fakir Mohan is the Gorky of Odisha. Durbar of Damapada state conferred on him the enviable title Saraswati. Dr. Mayadhar Mansingh calls him Thomas Hardy of Odisha. People call him the forerunner of Premchand and the first Indian author to deal with social realism through rustics and pastoral themes. Fakir Mohan has contributed only four novels and twenty-five stories, which endowed him the title of Katha Samrat (Emperor of Fiction) of the literature (FMU 2015, p.8).*

His “*Patent Medicine*” is a didactic presentation and could be called as a curative measure, an attempt to bring an addicted husband back on the track of civility that adheres to moral values and social discipline.

It is Sulochana Devi; the principal character of the story, who is presented as an upright wife, had to use a broomstick to discipline her wayward husband. We realize, herein, how Senapati evokes a sense of sarcasm by his covert suggestion of husband bashing as a remedy. He adds further sarcasm to the term by implying the shame culturally attached to the broom, which is perceived as a feminine weapon and the wife herself as a patriarchal servant. Fakir Mohan makes a veiled criticism of the norms of patriarchy and a depiction of the disillusionment that he might have experienced in studying the society of his times. The most important issue that is addressed here is the issue of patriarchy, where a woman is treated as a second rate citizen in comparison to men. Her only duty is to meet the need of her husband, treat him like God, and be subservient to him lifelong as a tool of enjoyment. This double standard of society is very much challenged herein. To read one of the feminist opinions by Sarala Devi in her feminist treatise,

*“The Rights of Women”, poses a very potent question- “a separate code of conduct exists for women. For instance, a term such as chaste which we hear so frequently seems always to refer to women. Strangely, we never find a corresponding term applicable in the case of men” (Devi and Sachidananda Mohanty, 1934 [2003], p.150).*

Another most popular title story “*Randipua Ananta*” is a story of a different taste. The eponymous character ‘Ananta’ happens to be a very notorious, and errant young man who subsequently transforms to become a Samaritan for the common cause that costs his life. The story delineates an incident and the role of Ananta as a saviour

of the life and property of those people who once levelled him derogatorily to address as ‘*Randipua*’; a distasteful tag that precedes his name. It was he who in order to check the floodwater enter into the village through internal seepage of the river-embankment, Ananta had to use the wooden door of his house to cover and fill the seepage hole while he stood like a pillar to support it and asked the villagers to pile soil onto it. Gradually his body was piled up, and ultimately he was buried to become a living tomb. He dedicated his life for the welfare of the villages, and with this act, he could set an example for others to care for community, to show dedication, and sacrifice for the common cause.

Fakir Mohan enjoys the honour as the father of Odia fiction, for his skilful depiction of unbiased realistic pictures of rural and feudal Odisha, all the way through, in common colloquial Odia language. In fact, with him, there started a new era, that was a radical departure from earlier Sanskrit tradition to modern realistic writing in Odia literary history. Most of his thematic concerns revolve around the world of peasantry, who were pitied against feudalism and were caught between tradition and modernity. According to the present theoretical research of subaltern studies, Fakir Mohan was a real scholar of Odia subalterns, whose works entailed a panoptic gaze on farming issues, problems of feudal system, English education, rising urbanity, widow wedding, women's issues, crisis of faith, trending education, poverty, untouchability, superstitions, rural transformations, and especially Odia nationalism. J. N Patnaik observes:

*“... Fakir Mohan Senapati (1843- 1918) is an integral part of the cultural history of Orissa. His relentless struggle to assert a distinct Oriya identity in the face of the growing dominance of Bengali and western cultures and his immense contribution towards the shaping of modern Orissa in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have turned him into a legendary hero of the Oriya race (Patnaik, 2008, p.56).”*

He is unsurpassable on many accounts, so far as the Odia prose and fictional writings are concerned. Most of his short stories reflect an astute understanding of the typicality of Odia cultural tradition, and the conflict between impending western versus the established eastern culture and tradition. He, too, highlights the superstitious beliefs and practices that once crippled the social fabric of Odisha. Through the artful and rustic presentation of the story of ‘*Rebati*’, he tries to illustrate the far-reaching consequences of the belief in a very lively manner, much to the understanding of the common mass of the then

period, so as to spread the awareness amongst the rural people. It was as if a religious pursuit on his part to keep trying to suppress such practices. The pathetic tone of the story is beyond comparison, which evokes awe and sympathy for the ordeal the protagonist goes through. The grand old mother represents the orthodox belief and tradition, whereas, the teacher Basu and Rebati represent the fashionable generation. Similarly, in ‘*Dak Munshi*’ Hari Singh is presented as the representative and a true specimen of Indian life and culture, on the contrary, though his son Gopal, he presents the so-called affluent class, and the culture of a Babu dome, that is grossly influenced by English education. Through this story, Fakir Mohan denounces the so-called English culture and vehemently opposes the way modern educated youths live up, which is much align to the age-old practices of normative behaviours and that stand in sharp contrast to the learned inhibitions of established traditions.

The above two stories i.e. *Rebati* and *Dak Munshi* though are often attributed as a conflict between Progressive and Primordial thought process or the generational perceptive differences; To hold education accountable for the ordeal appears to be a little farfetched and necessarily do not subscribe to the motif of the prose. While the Grand old lady in *Rebati* is under the spell of the age-old blind belief, in the ‘*Dak Munshi*’, It is the sheer arrogance, false propriety, and absence of humility in Gopal and that certainly can’t be the fault of little education he received and the subsequent appointment as an officer/ *Munshi* which was somewhat higher in rank and file to the job, his father served for long. If we are to call it “Education” be it either western or eastern, or give it any name, that seldom teaches or preaches the doctrine of inhuman attributes which Gopal did/render towards his father it would be a travesty of Education. It was rather the non-education of human values and moral principles of a higher order which was lacking in Gopal’s character that led to the suffering of his old father.

The time which Fakir Mohan survived is termed as “The Dark Age” and the age of many upheavals in every walk of life. The annals of history present many grim pictures of the then India and Odisha that witnessed the most infamous ‘*Na anka*’ famine in 1866. In Odisha, it was felt more severely and was quite acute in its effects. This disaster literally disordered and distorted the economic and social backbone, followed by the occupation of Orissa by British colonial forces in 1803. The colonial rulers tried to split the geographical entity into different segments to be governed under Madras, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Bengal, resulting in complete loss of identity of Odias. As stated above, the aggression by a handful of Bengalis to

finish the claim of “Odia” as a separate and distinct language. There were fast-changing social and domestic orders in the country. The rigid altar of the joint family system was crumbling fast. A tussle between the traditional life and society with the intruding alien culture and practices were brewing to take shape to put the habitual life and living of people at stake. All those we find quietly reflected in stories, i.e. “Dak Munshi” (The Post Master), Sabhya Zamindar (The Educated Feudal Lord), and to some extent in the fiction Chhamaan Atha Guntha (Six Acres and Eight Gunthas).

### CONCLUSION

Given the spectacle, it would be sheer injustice to blame one particular angle of modern education as solely responsible for the ordeal between Gopal and his father or Rebati and the grand old lady. It is the spectre of change, cultural aggression, and an atmosphere of compulsive changes that literally unsettled the roots of social transactions. It could be due to a gradual or sudden shift in psycho economic factors that leapfrogged to accommodate the changing scenarios that are inevitable, or at best it could be a lack of appetite to resist the onslaught of different provocations around, or could be due to poor grasp of the cultural contours of our age-old practices and the relevance of which was not properly imbibed ... hence it is the lack of education proper than the proper education that is responsible for the mess that happened between. To conclude the discussion it would be pertinent to quote Sri Ramakanta Rout who says:

*“Fakirmohan is a great genius, a versatile personality and an ardent literary artist in the true sense of the term. An irrecoverable vacuum was created when this great soul breathed his last on 14<sup>th</sup> June 1918, at Balasore and before Odisha lost its son of our soil much before it become a separate province. Both in the novel and short stories, Fakir Mohan applied novel treatment and typical characters astutely picked up from various social segments.”*(Rout-2010)

He has used pure satire and trenchant irony. It is his unique instrumental technique in the literary genre. He is sometimes called the Gorky of Odisha. People call him the forerunner of Premchand and therefore the first Indian author to bear the flag of social realism through rustics and pastoral themes. He makes people laugh to their heart's content. Inside irony, there is an implied sympathy and pathetic tone under the surface of the attack on vice or the villains. Hence, his prose works and fictions are always fresh to impress a variety of readership as a record of rich in human episodes.

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